



Conference Report

WAPES European Regional Conference 2026

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Disclaimer

This publication was produced jointly by the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES) and the Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (LEA BiH) following the WAPES European Regional Conference held in Sarajevo, 20-21 May 2026.

The information, analyses, and opinions presented herein reflect the contributions of the conference speakers and participants. They do not necessarily represent the official views of WAPES, LEA BiH, or any participating institution.



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A. Introduction

Public Employment Services across Europe are operating in an increasingly complex environment marked by demographic change, labour and skills shortages, technological disruption, labour mobility pressures, and rapidly evolving expectations from employers and jobseekers alike.

At the same time, digitalisation and artificial intelligence are reshaping labour market systems. PES are therefore being asked to rethink not only how services are delivered, but also how labour market information, counselling, partnerships and workforce development are organised.

Held in Sarajevo on 20-21 May 2026, the conference focused on three interconnected thematic priorities:

- Bridging workforce skills shortages through innovation, labour market intelligence and cooperation;
- Supporting labour mobility, skills recognition and international cooperation;
- Preparing PES for the future through counselling excellence, digital transformation and responsible AI.

The conference demonstrated that today's labour market challenges are deeply interconnected. Skills shortages, labour mobility, demographic change, digitalisation and AI cannot be addressed through isolated policies or institutions. Instead, PES increasingly need to operate as ecosystem coordinators capable of connecting labour market intelligence, training systems, employers, mobility frameworks and social support mechanisms.

Throughout the discussions, a central message emerged repeatedly: the future of PES will depend not only on technology or policy reform, but on the ability to combine human-centred services, institutional cooperation and data-driven innovation.

B. Opening session

The conference was officially opened by representatives of the Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, WAPES, the European Union Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, International Organization for Migration, the Regional Cooperation Council and the International Labour Organization.

Speakers highlighted the strategic importance of Public Employment Services in supporting labour market resilience and social cohesion during a period of profound transformation. Particular emphasis was placed on:

- the growing mismatch between labour supply and labour demand;
- the need for stronger labour market intelligence systems;
- demographic and migration pressures across Europe;
- the impact of AI and digitalisation on work and service delivery;
- the importance of partnerships between PES, education systems, employers and international organisations.

The opening remarks framed the conference as a platform not only for policy exchange, but also for practical cooperation and shared learning among WAPES members and partners.

C. Thematic Block I - Bridging Workforce Skills Shortages – Innovation, Data and Cooperation

The first thematic block focused on the structural transformation of labour markets and the role of Public Employment Services in responding to labour and skills shortages through innovation, data systems and cooperation.

A key conclusion from the discussions was that labour shortages are increasingly not only a problem of insufficient labour supply, but also a problem of coordination failures across labour market systems.

Panel Discussion 1 - Labour Market Intelligence and Skills Forecasting

The first panel examined how labour market intelligence can evolve from a descriptive tool into a strategic operational function supporting skills development, matching and workforce planning.

From observation to action

The discussion was moderated by Ms Inga Balnanosienė, Director of the Employment Service under the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania.

Yves Magnan (FOREM, Belgium) presented an integrated approach to labour market intelligence linking data collection, skills analysis, employer needs, training systems and service delivery. His intervention stressed that labour market intelligence only creates value when it is operationalised into concrete pathways for jobseekers, employers and policymakers.

Michel van Smoorenburg (UWV, Netherlands) explored how international labour market information can support responses to labour shortages across Europe. His analysis demonstrated that shortages and surpluses often coexist simultaneously, highlighting the importance of mobility, information sharing and better coordination mechanisms between countries.

Sven Daverveld (UWV, Netherlands) presented the Dutch Regional Work Centres model, illustrating how integrated one-stop-shop approaches can reduce fragmentation between institutions and improve labour market outcomes for both employers and jobseekers.

A recurring theme throughout the panel was the need to move beyond fragmented institutional approaches toward coordinated labour market ecosystems where PES act as facilitators and connectors between stakeholders.

Key Takeaways

- Labour market intelligence must support operational decision-making, not only reporting;
- Skills shortages frequently reflect coordination failures rather than absolute labour deficits;
- Integrated governance and one-stop-shop approaches improve labour market responsiveness;
- Cross-border comparability of labour market intelligence remains limited;
- Human oversight remains essential despite growing use of AI and algorithms.

Panel Discussion 2 - Innovation and the Future Workforce

The second panel focused on innovation, hidden skills supply, generational transformation and new approaches to workforce activation.

The discussion was moderated by Mr Shawn Mendes, Director for International Relations, Swedish Public Employment Agency (Arbetsförmedlingen).

Azza El Hayek (SkillLab) introduced a major conceptual shift that shaped much of the conference discussion: the problem is often not the absence of skills, but the invisibility of skills. She argued that many individuals possess valuable competences that are poorly represented in traditional labour market systems, particularly migrants, individuals with informal experience and people with fragmented career pathways.

Her intervention highlighted the growing importance of skills-based approaches, interoperable skills systems and AI-supported skills extraction tools capable of identifying transferable competences beyond formal qualifications.

Željko Pauković (Mozaik Foundation, Bosnia and Herzegovina) emphasised the importance of ecosystem coordination between PES, municipalities, employers and education systems. His contribution demonstrated that innovation is not only technological, but also organisational and institutional.

Jan Zlatan Kulenović (MUNJA) addressed the transformation of workforce expectations among younger generations, particularly Gen Z, whose communication habits, work expectations and relationship with employers increasingly challenge traditional labour market models.

Kristina Mazalin (Employment Service of Croatia) presented Croatia's voucher system as a practical policy response to skills shortages and lifelong learning challenges. The system enables individuals to access targeted upskilling and reskilling opportunities linked directly to labour market demand.

Key takeaways

- Labour markets contain significant underutilised skills supply;
- Skills-based approaches are increasingly replacing qualification-based approaches;
- PES must redesign services to respond to generational change;
- User-centred and decentralised training tools improve responsiveness;
- Innovation depends as much on coordination and governance as on technology itself.

D. Thematic Block II - Skills Without Borders – Recognition, Cooperation and a Mobile Workforce

The second thematic block explored labour mobility, migration governance, skills recognition and cross-border cooperation.

Discussions highlighted that labour mobility is no longer a secondary issue, but a structural feature of modern labour markets.

Panel Discussion 3 - Regional Cooperation, Recognition and Labour Mobility

The discussion was moderated by Ms Živa Štiglic, Head of International Department, Employment Service of Slovenia.

Andrea Frkanova (IOM Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia) presented labour mobility as a full lifecycle process requiring coordinated interventions before departure, during migration and throughout labour market integration.

A major focus of her intervention concerned Migration Information Centres and one-stop-shop approaches supporting migrants through legal guidance, employment services, skills recognition and integration support.

She also stressed the importance of pre-departure preparation, including:

- language training;
- understanding labour rights;
- realistic labour market expectations;
- cultural orientation;
- targeted skills preparation.

Her contribution illustrated how migration governance increasingly requires structured partnerships between PES, migration authorities, employers and education systems.

Cristina Mereuta (European Training Foundation) highlighted that recognition systems remain one of the principal bottlenecks limiting labour mobility across Europe. Differences in qualifications frameworks, standards and occupational systems continue to slow mobility and reduce transparency.

Meltem Anduşe (İŞKUR, Türkiye) presented institutional approaches to integrating foreign workers through coordinated PES systems and targeted migration programmes.

Anka Rode (Employment Service of Slovenia) discussed the bilateral labour mobility agreement between Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as an example of structured and transparent labour mobility cooperation.

Ivan Barbačić (LEA BiH) addressed the paradoxical situation faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, where labour emigration, labour shortages and inactivity coexist simultaneously. He emphasised that migration will continue regardless of policy choices, but that the key challenge is ensuring mobility remains structured, fair and beneficial for all actors.

Key takeaways

- Labour mobility increasingly functions as a structural labour market mechanism;
- Recognition systems remain a major obstacle to efficient mobility;
- Bilateral agreements provide scalable and transparent labour mobility frameworks;
- PES play a strategic role in migration governance;
- Mobility policies require strong coordination between labour market and migration institutions.

E. Thematic Block III - PES for the Future – Strengthening Skills, Technology and Counselling Excellence

The third thematic block focused on the transformation of Public Employment Services themselves, particularly regarding counselling, digitalisation and artificial intelligence.

Launch of the Research Paper: Future Skills for PES Counsellors

The discussion was moderated by Ms Alia Kamlani, Partner, Deloitte.

The launch of the WAPES research paper on the future skills needs of PES counsellors marked one of the central moments of the conference. The research was conducted in cooperation with the University of Derby and the University of Manchester.

The study explored how digitalisation, labour market complexity, demographic change and AI are transforming the role of PES counsellors.

The presenters emphasised that while the core mission of counselling remains stable - guidance, trust-building and support - the complexity of the role is increasing significantly.

PES counsellors will increasingly require hybrid skill profiles:

- interpersonal competencies;
- digital literacy;
- analytical skills;
- behavioural insight;
- adaptability;
- multidisciplinary cooperation.

The discussions also highlighted the importance of organisational investment in training, professionalisation and staff wellbeing.

Key takeaways

- Effective counselling depends on trust, continuity and professional judgement;
- Digitalisation increases the complexity of counsellor roles;
- Automation should support, not replace, human interaction;
- PES require stronger professionalisation frameworks;
- Organisational change and leadership are essential for transformation.

Panel Discussion 4 - Counselling Excellence and Partnerships

The discussion was moderated by Mr Anton Eckersley, International Relations Director, APM Group.

Marc Hanke (Ingeus GmbH/APM Group) introduced the concept of “heart and algorithm,” emphasising that successful PES systems must combine technological innovation with emotional intelligence and trust-based human relationships.

His intervention strongly reinforced the conference-wide message that AI should support counsellors rather than replace them.

Gabriela Álvarez Roosvall (SEPE, Spain) presented Spain’s Centres for Guidance in Employment (COE) network as an example of balancing national coordination with local flexibility in counselling systems.

Ljiljana Pandžić (EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina) highlighted the role of EU support in strengthening labour market institutions and PES reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Key takeaways

- Counselling remains fundamentally relational and human-centred;
- Counsellor roles are becoming increasingly complex;
- Institutional support and staff wellbeing are essential;
- Partnerships improve service quality and coordination;
- National frameworks must remain flexible and locally responsive.

Panel Discussion 5 - Digital Transformation and AI in PES

The discussion was moderated by Ms Cristina Mereuta, Head of Unit, Knowledge Hub for Skills and Jobs, European Training Foundation.

The final panel explored how digitalisation and AI are transforming recruitment, matching and employment services.

Peter van der Bel and Ludger Weller (Cappr.org) presented a critical analysis of AI-driven recruitment systems, arguing that widespread AI-generated applications increasingly undermine traditional recruitment signals such as CVs and cover letters.

Their intervention suggested that future recruitment systems may increasingly rely on behavioural, visual and skills-based assessment approaches rather than text-based applications alone.

Aygun Mehraliyeva (State Employment Agency of Azerbaijan) presented Azerbaijan's digital transformation process and the development of integrated labour market platforms connecting employers, jobseekers and institutions.

Luka Đuričković (Employment Agency of Montenegro) highlighted the challenges associated with institutional modernisation and the transition away from fragmented legacy systems.

Key takeaways

- AI is reshaping labour market signalling and recruitment systems;
- Digital transformation is primarily an institutional transformation process;
- Integrated digital ecosystems improve service delivery and coordination;
- Data governance and interoperability remain critical challenges;
- Human oversight remains essential in AI-supported systems.

F. Final Conclusions

The conference demonstrated that Public Employment Services are entering a new phase of transformation.

PES are increasingly expected to act simultaneously as:

- labour market coordinators;
- skills ecosystem facilitators;
- mobility actors;
- digital service providers;
- inclusion institutions;

- strategic public infrastructure.

Across all sessions, several common conclusions emerged:

1. Labour market challenges are interconnected

Skills shortages, demographic change, migration, digitalisation and AI are deeply linked and cannot be addressed separately.

2. Human-centred approaches remain essential

Despite rapid technological change, trust, guidance and human interaction remain central to effective employment services.

3. Partnerships are becoming a core function of PES

Future PES effectiveness will depend on the ability to coordinate ecosystems involving employers, education systems, social services, migration authorities and international organisations.

4. Labour mobility is becoming structural

Mobility increasingly functions as a long-term mechanism balancing labour market demand and supply across countries.

5. PES workforce transformation is unavoidable

The future effectiveness of PES depends heavily on investment in counsellor skills, organisational development and institutional adaptability.

G. Looking Ahead

The Sarajevo conference reinforced the strategic role of WAPES as a global platform for cooperation, peer learning and innovation among Public Employment Services.

The discussions highlighted that no single institution or country possesses all solutions to today's labour market challenges. However, through international cooperation, shared learning and coordinated approaches, PES can strengthen their collective capacity to respond effectively to labour market transformation.

The conference also opened new perspectives for future cooperation on:

- labour market intelligence;
- skills ecosystems;
- labour mobility governance;
- AI and digitalisation;
- counsellor professionalisation;
- ethical and human-centred PES transformation.

The Sarajevo discussions demonstrated a strong willingness among participants to continue exchanges beyond the conference itself and to further strengthen cooperation within the WAPES network and with international partners.

In a rapidly changing world of work, the future of Public Employment Services will depend on their ability to combine adaptability, cooperation, innovation and human-centred values.

H. Synthesised anonymous participant feedback

The conference highlighted the importance of cooperation, partnership and networking across Public Employment Services. A key takeaway was that skills shortages have become one of the most significant challenges across Europe, requiring PES to go beyond job matching and play a stronger role in identifying current and future skills needs, supporting training and reskilling, and strengthening labour mobility and skills recognition. Participants also emphasised the need for adaptability and resilience in PES counselling, as well as the growing importance of modern, digital and user-friendly services. The discussions showed that the future of PES will depend on combining human counselling expertise with digital tools and artificial intelligence in a meaningful and balanced way.

I. About the Hosts

The WAPES European Regional Conference 2026 was hosted by the Labour and Employment Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (LEA BiH) in cooperation with the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES).

The conference benefited from the support and participation of numerous institutional, academic and operational partners, including the European Union Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the European Training Foundation (ETF), Deloitte, FIEP/IEP, SkillLab, Ingeus/APM Group and Cappr.org.

WAPES and LEA BiH warmly thank all speakers, presenters, moderators, panellists, participants and partners for their valuable contributions, active engagement and support throughout the conference.

Conference sessions were held at the Mövenpick Hotel Sarajevo, while the social programme offered opportunities to experience Sarajevo's cultural heritage and strengthen cooperation among participants.

Photo Source: WAPES

